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James L. Kugel: The Ladder of Jacob

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Chapter One

JACOB AND THE BIBLE'S ANCIENT INTERPRETERS

One question that troubled ancient readers of the Bible was that of the purpose of the book of Genesis. This first book of the Torah (Pentateuch) was in some ways the most problematic. Those that followed—Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy—all contain divinely given laws, so their purpose was clear enough: they were written in order to guide people along the proper path in life. But Genesis has no laws or commandments to speak of; it is a collection of stories about Israel's ancient ancestors, starting with Adam and Eve and leading up to the founders of the Israelite nation, Jacob and his twelve sons. Now, history may be interesting, even important, but to a certain way of thinking, history per se does not deserve a place in the Torah. Why, then, was the book of Genesis included?¹

Various answers were given to this question in ancient times. The author of the book of *Jubilees* (early second century B.C.E.), for example, understood Genesis to be a crypto-halakhic work; that is, although it has no overt laws per se, he maintained, its stories nonetheless contain legal teachings in hidden form, alluding here and there to divine commandments and practices that had been instituted with Israel's ancestors long before the great revelation of biblical law at Mount Sinai. Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 B.C.E. to ca. 30 C.E.), somewhat analogously, saw the various people whose lives are recounted in Genesis as walking embodiments of the laws that were to be given later on at Mount

Sinai. Many writers from the time of Philo and afterward, including the founders of Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, saw the heroes and heroines of Genesis as moral exemplars, whose lives might serve as models for generations to come. This last, indeed, has been the dominant approach to the book of Genesis from late antiquity almost to the present day.

But when it comes down to cases, this last approach runs into problems, particularly with regard to Jacob and his family. Jacob himself begins life as a bit of a sharpster: he cheats his brother Esau out of his rightful inheritance as the firstborn of the family, then tricks his poor, blind father into giving him a paternal blessing intended for Esau. Next Jacob travels to his uncle Laban's house, where he ends up acquiring, apparently by somewhat questionable methods, most of Laban's flocks (a prime form of wealth in ancient Israel). Thereafter he departs, like a thief in the night, for his homeland of Canaan. Meanwhile, Jacob's wife Rachel, Laban's daughter, is shown in a hardly better light; the narrative reports that she stole her father's sacred images (*teraphim*), then hid them in her saddlebags and lied to him to prevent their discovery. Of Jacob's children, one ends up sleeping with his father's concubine and another ends up having relations with his own son's wife. When Jacob's only daughter ends up being raped, her brothers respond by invading the rapist's town and killing every man in it, subsequently plundering all the townsmen's flocks and possessions, including wives and children. Sometime after that, Jacob's sons seize their younger brother Joseph, strip off his clothes, and throw him into a pit with the intention of killing him; then they relent and merely sell him as a slave to a passing caravan. "Dysfunctional" is probably the first word an observer would use to describe such a family in modern times; but whatever word is used, one would be hard-pressed, on the face of things, to claim that these stories about Jacob and his children could ever have been intended to provide readers with a

set of moral exempla by which to steer their own course in this world.

The logical next sentence in this exposition ought to be, “Enter the biblical interpreter.” If I hesitate to write it, it is because I do not wish to give readers the impression that ancient biblical interpretation is principally a matter of apologetics, touching up the biblical portrayal of various figures to remove most of their faults and so make them appropriate role models for the Bible’s readers. Interpreters did indeed do such things sometimes, but apologetics was hardly their main purpose. Principally, they were interested in making sense of biblical narratives, laws, prophecies, and prayers; in particular, they addressed themselves to narrative gaps and other omissions, to apparent contradictions, and sometimes to historical references or words that were no longer understood. The questions they sought to answer—particularly the most ancient of ancient interpreters—were, Why, and how, did X do what he did? How am I to go about carrying out this law today? What was this prophet talking about, and what does it matter to us? Or sometimes simply, What do these words mean?

It is true, however, that the search for answers to such questions was hardly conducted according to the rules of modern biblical interpretation. Ancient interpreters approached their task with certain presuppositions, and some have already been hinted at above. The Bible, and particularly its first five books, comprised for them a divinely given guide; therefore, everything within it had a lesson to impart. The Torah was, in this sense, a supremely *relevant* book and not just a remnant from the ancient past. At the same time, its teachings were not always obvious; indeed, ancient interpreters assumed that much of the Bible spoke *cryptically*, saying X when what it really meant was Y. The third presupposition was that the Bible was one harmonious, *perfect* document. That is, although written down over a long period of time, by different authors in different circumstances, it was

nonetheless without mistakes or inconsistencies or internal contradictions; indeed, in the extreme formulation, no word of it was extraneous. The fourth presupposition was that the biblical text as a whole, despite its references to human authors and its apparent distinction between words specifically attributed to God and the rest of its words, had altogether come *from God* or at God's command or inspiration, so that it was essentially a divine text, the very word of God. It is these four assumptions that animate all of ancient biblical interpretation.²

THE DEVELOPMENT OF EXEGETICAL MOTIFS

The present volume consists of a series of studies of ancient biblical interpretation, all of which center on the person of Jacob and his immediate family. Its particular focus is not so much on the *what* of ancient biblical interpretation (a subject I have tried to survey in some detail elsewhere)³ as on the *how* of its development, including, prominently, an attempt to untangle the interrelationship of various interpretive texts and traditions. In order to pursue this subject, it may be well to define here some of the terms frequently used in the following chapters.

Ancient biblical interpretation is an interpretation of biblical verses, not of whole chapters or stories or larger units. Even when interpreters had their eyes on the larger context, they always framed the question they sought to answer in terms of a specific verse, or more typically, one or two words prominent in that verse. In other words, they asked, Why does Jacob set up a pillar (מצבה) in Gen. 28:18 instead of building an altar and sacrificing to God? What is the connection between the brief account of Reuben's sin with Bilhah in Gen. 35:22 and the next verse, "And Jacob had twelve sons"? What does God mean by referring to Jacob as his "firstborn son" in Exod. 4:22? The answers given to such questions usually went well beyond the verses mentioned

and touched on wider issues in the sequence of events in the narrative—indeed, on Jacob’s overall character in Genesis and even such matters as the election of Israel, God’s role in human affairs, and sin and forgiveness—but the starting point for any evocation of such larger issues was always the precise wording of a particular phrase or verse. (This phrase or verse may also be referred to as the biblical *site* of an interpretive tradition.)

So it was that ancient biblical interpretation traveled in little packets, called **exegetical motifs**. An exegetical motif is an explanation of the meaning of a biblical verse, especially a potentially problematic one, or even of a phrase or a word within that verse. In this book, exegetical motifs are given descriptive titles, enclosed in quotation marks: “Angels Descended to Admire Jacob,” “Rise and Fall of Empires,” “Killed One Each,” “City with a Criminal Past,” and so forth.⁴ The explanations of biblical verses embodied in these motifs were passed on orally, from person to person and from generation to generation, as an accompaniment to the biblical text itself. Thus, if a person were to ask, “How did two men manage to conquer and kill an entire city?” the answer would probably be some version of the exegetical motif, “Swords from Heaven,” a motif that interpreted Gen. 34:25 as hinting that Simeon and Levi had acquired special armaments that allowed them to accomplish this improbable feat. Similarly, the answer to “Why were all the men of Shechem killed because of the rape of Dinah?” would be framed in terms of one or another exegetical motif dealing with a specific verse, for example, “The Other Shechemites Participated,” a motif built on a particular word in Gen. 34:27.

Sometimes, the same basic explanation of the meaning of a particular verse can exist in different forms; these are called **variants** of the same **basic motif**. For example, the basic motif “Staircase of History” has two variants, one involving a series of twelve successive periods of domination, the second involving four foreign

empires that were to dominate Israel. Often, two or more different motifs were created for the same verse; these are called **rival motifs**. For example, “Staircase of History” and “Rise and Fall of Empires” are two rival motifs both seeking to explain a certain detail in the account of Jacob’s dream in Genesis 28.

Exegetical motifs are explanations of verses—all kinds of verses, verses found in laws, prophecies, songs, and so forth. When they are found in biblical narrative, they often give rise to **narrative expansions**, that is to say, little bits of narrative that are added to the retelling of a biblical story. For example, the motif “Saw Bilhah Bathing”—which originated as an explanation of a problematic phrase in Gen. 49:4—gave rise to a narrative expansion in the book of *Jubilees*, which, in retelling the biblical story, specifies that on one occasion Reuben had seen his father’s concubine bathing in a certain place and that it was this that caused him later to sin. An exegetical motif is by nature abstract: it is an idea, a way of explaining a verse. A narrative expansion is always specific, the particular words of a particular text in which an exegetical motif is embodied. For example, the narrative expansion of the motif “Saw Bilhah Bathing” in the book of *Jubilees* is essentially the same as the narrative expansion of “Saw Bilhah Bathing” in the *Testament of Reuben*—no surprise, since the author of the latter was apparently well acquainted with the former and copied much material. But sometimes narrative expansions will differ in one or more **elements**, significant details that distinguish one narrative expansion from another. For example, the motif “Bilhah Was Asleep,” common to these same two texts, is embodied in two somewhat different narrative expansions: in the *Testament of Reuben* it is specified that Bilhah was intoxicated and unconscious, whereas this element is not present in *Jubilees*.

Ancient biblical interpretation did not develop overnight but over the course of several centuries. So it was that the existence of one exegetical motif often contributed to the creation of another.

The motif “Abraham Saw a Dire Future,”⁵ aimed at explaining Gen. 15:12, probably influenced the creation of the “Rise and Fall of Empires” and “Staircase of History” motifs, although the latter two pertained to an entirely different biblical narrative. Sometimes the same motif will be applied to two different sites, that is, it may be offered as an explanation of two quite separate verses (often with less than perfect results): this is the phenomenon of **midrashic doublets**. It also happens that an exegetical motif originally designed to explain one biblical verse will come to be associated—wrongly—with another site entirely. This is called **transfer of affects**.⁶

Finally, it should be noted that ancient interpreters—the creators of what were to become interpretive traditions—were themselves usually very respectful of earlier interpreters and their traditions. Thus, if interpreters were aware of two rival motifs, each of which explained a certain verse in its own way, they often would incorporate both in their retelling of a biblical story. The same might be true even of two narrative expansions embodying the same exegetical motif but differing from each other in one or more elements; a later ancient interpreter might blend, or simply confuse, the two previous narrative expansions in his own, new retelling. So it was that the phenomenon of **overkill** was created, whereby a single retelling of a biblical text may contain two quite independent explanations of how an event occurred, or why, or even two separate accounts of the event itself. As will be seen in the following, **overkill** is one of the most characteristic features of ancient biblical interpretation.

OTHER JACOB TRADITIONS

A great many of the exegetical motifs concerning Jacob and his children are not treated in the present study. The interested reader is referred to two of my earlier books, where Jacob’s relations

with his father Isaac and mother Rebekah, for example, or his early struggles with his brother Esau, as well as the tale of his son Joseph, have been surveyed in some detail.⁷ If, for the present book, I have chosen to focus on other incidents and stages in Jacob's life, it is because these afford a rich opportunity to look at some of the very earliest examples of ancient biblical interpreters at work, as well as to explore the interrelationship of various motifs and texts in the emergence of the Jewish and Christian exegetical traditions.

And so: after his stormy upbringing with his older brother Esau, Jacob leaves home. His destination is the land from which his mother Rebekah had come, and the relatives that she had there: her brother Laban and his two daughters, Leah and Rachel. On his way, however, Jacob stops in a place called Luz to spend the night. It is there he has a fateful dream that was to influence the course of the rest of his life.